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Fantastical Imaginations:

Studying the Supernatural History of Scotland

Lizanne Henderson

. . . it is declarit that all ydle personis ganging about in ony cuntrie of this realme using subtill, crafty and unlauchfull playis, as juglarie fast and lowis, and sic utheris, the idle people calling thame selffis Egyptianis [gypsies], or ony utheris that feny eis thame selffis to have knowlege of prophecie, charmeing or utheris abusit sciences, quhairby they persuaid the people that they can tell thair weardis [fate] deathis and fortunes and sic uther fantasticall imaginations.¹

The term ‘folklore’ has been a problematic one, since it was coined in 1846 by William Thoms,² for it has been “predicated on the death of tradition”.³ What many of the pioneering folklorists forgot to mention was that as quickly as one tradition dies, another is born, and so folklore goes on refreshed and renewed. However, whatever the drawbacks of the word, it caught on quickly in the British Isles and was cemented with the creation of The Folk-Lore Society (1878) in London, of which prolific Scots writer Andrew Lang was a founding member.⁴ Elsewhere other terms were adopted instead of, or as well as, ‘folklore’. For instance, the German *volkskunde*, French *traditions populaires*, Italian *storia delle tradizioni popolari*, Swedish *folklivsforskning* (folklife research). The Irish have *Béaloideas* (*béal*

¹ RPS (27 Oct. 1579) ‘For punishment of the strang and ydle beggaris’. Similar legislation was passed in 1575.

² William Thoms, using the name Ambrose Merton, wrote to *The Athenaeum* in 1846 to suggest that instead of the definition “Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature” a better terminology might be found “by a good Saxon compound, Folklore—the Lore of the People”. *The Athenaeum* No. 982 (22 August 1846) 862-3, reprinted as William Thoms, “Folklore”, in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Eaglewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 4-6.

³ Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore. Tradition, Modernity, Identity*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000) 8.

⁴ Other founding members, often referred to as the ‘Great Team’, included G. L. Gomme, Edwin Sidney Hartland, Edward Clodd, and Alfred Nutt.

‘mouth’ and *oideas* ‘instruction’) which carries the sense of orally communicated tradition.⁵ Folklore is understood to embrace all aspects of folk activity such as belief, custom, expressive forms and behaviours, folktale and story-telling, ballad, music and song, folk drama, crafts and material culture, calendar customs, courtship, marriage, and child-rearing, indeed all facets of culture in the widest sense. However it could be argued that the retreat from folklore began almost at the moment of its discovery as the everyday assumptions and understandings of the subordinate classes were gradually degraded, dismissed and demonized by the learned as “fantastical imaginations”.

The folklorist William Henderson, a native of Durham, expressed some of the difficulties of the task he faced in the introduction to his study of the borderlands between England and Scotland. “It is difficult, while living on the surface of society, so smooth, so rational, so commonplace, to realise what relics of a widely different past linger in its depths”. He was, like many of his contemporaries, both in England and Scotland, concerned that many of the customs and pastimes, stories and legends, were “fast fading away and perishing”, thus it was up to collectors like himself to shoulder the responsibility of preserving the memory of these traditions for future generations. Henderson remarked that his nineteenth century contemporaries both celebrated and lamented the disappearance of folklore: “I for one will frankly acknowledge that I regret much which we are losing, that I would not have these vestiges of the past altogether effaced”. Paradoxically, Henderson further noted that those “who mix much among the lower orders, and have opportunities of enquiring closely into their beliefs, customs and usages, will find in remote places — nay, even in our towns and larger villages — a vast mass of superstition, holding its ground

⁵ Roslyn Blyn-LaDrew, “Geoffrey Keating, William Thoms, Raymond Williams, and the Terminology of Folklore: ‘*Béaloideas*’ as a ‘Keyword’”, *Folklore Forum* 27/2: 5-37.

most tenaciously”.⁶

The collecting of folklore could have other motives. Rev. James Napier, who gathered his materials primarily from the Glasgow region, did so in order to “exhibit” the “degrading influence on society” that superstitions continued to have in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Napier was not convinced, like others of his day, that the superstitions of the eighteenth century had died out, that “when we speak of the Folk Lore of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers, we believe that we are speaking of beliefs which have passed away, beliefs from which we ourselves are free”. A reconsideration of the matter revealed to him that “we will find that in many respects our beliefs and practices, although somewhat modernised, are essentially little different from those of last century”.⁷ Setting aside Napier’s professional desire to take the high moral ground, his collection is an invaluable source of traditions and beliefs from his parish, though, at times, his struggle to reconcile folk belief with his own worldview can be erratic and idiosyncratic to say the least.

Folklorists have, like William Henderson, intentionally preserved folkloric material for posterity, while men such as Napier have, no doubt unintentionally, contributed to the survival of the very customs and beliefs that gave such offence. The process of writing down ‘folklore’ had two curious effects. On the one hand, the information was disseminated to a much wider audience, and thus had the effect of keeping a tradition or belief going for longer than perhaps it might have otherwise. But, on the other hand, the traditions and beliefs became ‘frozen in time’, encapsulations of either days gone by, examples of quaintness, or worse, barbarism.

The process of using folkloristic material to enhance a particular argument

⁶ William Henderson, *Notes on the Folk Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1866) vii, xvii.

⁷ James Napier, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland*, (1879; Wakefield: EP, 1976) vi-vii.

has, of course, a much earlier history than that of the age of the folklorist proper. Just as John Francis Campbell of Islay collected, in the nineteenth century, copious Gaelic folktales and legends, in part to preserve aspects of his culture that he feared were dying out,⁸ so too, in the later seventeenth century Robert Kirk recorded incidents of fairy belief and second sight, though in his case, his motives were to protect his religion. The latter's concern was to defend religion against the ravages of atheism. In his view to demonstrate the reality of spirits, demons, fairies, second sight and the rest was to prove the existence of God.

One might justifiably ask why we need to continuously define the genres we study, but as Roger Abrahams points out, "how we define folklore has an important effect on the way we practice the discipline".⁹ While the dictionary has defined 'folk' as "a people, nation, race; people of a particular group or class; people in general; one's family or relatives",¹⁰ folklorist Alan Dundes took this one step further when he said "the term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor".¹¹ Neither of these definitions are particularly new as a reading of Raymond Williams' *Keywords* reveals. 'Folk' was a common variant in old Teutonic languages. It held a general meaning of 'people', "in a range from particular social formations, including nations, to people in general . . . it is typically friendly and informal, people seen by one of themselves rather than from above or outside".¹²

There have been many scholarly attempts made to define and explain folk

⁸ J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, 2 vols. (1860-1; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994), and *More West Highland Tales*, 2 vols. (1960; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994).

⁹ Roger D. Abrahams, "Personal Power and Social Restraint in the definition of Folklore", *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971): 16.

¹⁰ "Folk" *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary*, 2 vols. (New York: Collins, 1970) loc. cit.

¹¹ Alan Dundes, "What is Folklore?" *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (London: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 2.

¹² Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, (N.p.: Fontana Press, 1976) 136.

belief.¹³ In the Early Modern period, when popular culture and folk belief were under threat as never before, the quest often involved distinguishing supernatural or magical beliefs, as held by the folk, from supernatural or magical beliefs, as expressed in religion. Separation of these two ideas was a painful, and often a fruitless exercise.

Fundamentally, a folk belief is something that is communally held to be true. The level of belief may vary in degree or intensity, or alter from time to time, or situation to situation. But why, one might reasonably ask, does one person or societal group, interpret a given event as a natural event, while another opts for a supernatural explanation. It is easier to accept that a person may have good reason to give a paranormal interpretation when they have personally been the object of the occurrence. It is perhaps more difficult to explain why someone who has not personally been involved in 'unexplained' phenomena should adopt the supernatural as a hypothetical explanation. Such a person could, in other words, believe that fairies were capable of the abduction of humans without ever having been abducted themselves, or even having known someone who had been so 'taken'. Culture, and what is regarded as culturally acceptable and/or viable, has much to do with how a person interprets, or come to terms with, a given event. The man who insists that his child, or his wife, was stolen by the fairies will only be believed by his peers if such an explanation seems credible to them also.

Two major belief narrative genres are legend and memorate.¹⁴ The distinction

¹³ A particularly interesting study is that of David Hufford who concentrates on the 'Old Hag' tradition in *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982). For Scotland, see Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001; Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007). A recent attempt to study the psychological reasons behind current 'superstitious' beliefs is Stuart A. Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁴ The exemplar is similar to legend, is told as an instructional tale and usually is about saints. The

between the two is the level of belief expressed both in the narrative and by the narrator. William Bascom defines legend as a prose narrative generally accepted as true by both the narrator and the audience. Legends are set in the recent past, in a world not far removed from today. More often the attitude is secular as opposed to sacred and the principle characters are human.¹⁵ The believability of the legend is, according to Linda Degh, the cornerstone of this genre.¹⁶ The memorate is essentially a personal experience narrative. As the legend is believed because it happened to someone else, the memorate is believed because it happened to the narrator. A memorate can in time develop into a legend.¹⁷ The major difference between the memorate and the legend lies in the level of interpretation given. Memorates rarely offer statements of personal interpretation. Conversely, legends have a tendency to stress interpretation. The fact that memorates are accounts of an individual's actual experience makes them the most vibrant belief form. Recovering memorates, or first person accounts, is problematic but not impossible in an historical context. They may be preserved, for example — even at one remove — in witch trial statements, which can sometimes offer the closest thing to the true voice of the folk if the material is handled carefully and with caution.¹⁸ Margaret Bennett's contribution to this volume discusses the relationship between memorate and legend, specifically in a Gaelic context.

Folk custom is an integral part of culture. It operates as an invisible framework which guides and supports nearly every other aspect of folk belief and

dite does not generally deal with any particular individual.

¹⁵ William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narrative", *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1965): 3-20.

¹⁶ Linda Degh, "What is the Legend After All?" *Contemporary Legend* 1 (1991): 23-5.

¹⁷ Lauri Honko, "Memorates and the Study of Folk Beliefs", *Journal of American Folklore* 1 (1964): 12.

¹⁸ Arguments in defence of using witch trial testimonies are found in the work of Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. R. Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1991). See also Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, and chapter 7 below.

practice. When someone made a journey to a holy or healing well, it was customary practice that took them there, which might or might not have involved belief in the magical attributes of the well water.¹⁹ After about 1650 scholars began to make distinctions between popular or folk culture and elite culture. Though folk beliefs and practices were largely rejected they nevertheless continued to fascinate. John Aubrey, who derived a significant amount of his information from Scotland through correspondence, opined that “old customs and old wives-fables are gross things: but yet ought not to be quite rejected: there may be some truth and usefulness be elicited out of them: besides, ‘tis a pleasure to consider the errors that enveloped former ages: as also the present”.²⁰ It should be understood, however, that in earlier centuries the term, ‘custom’, embraced much of what is today carried by the word culture. In the works of Scottish historians from the sixteenth- to the eighteenth-centuries the sense was conveyed by the word ‘manners’. It has been said that sixteenth-century historians such as Hector Boece and John Leslie were at their most interesting when discussing “the auld Scottis maneris”.²¹ Francis Bacon, much read and respected in Scotland, described custom as induced and habitual inertial behaviour; “Men Profess, Protest, Engage, Give Great Words, and then Doe just as they have Done before. As if they were Dead Images, and Engines moved onely by the Wheelles of *Custom*”. For Bacon, custom was a conceivable way to encourage better habits early on in life; “Since Custom is the principal Magistrate of Man’s Life, let Men, by all means, endeavour to obtain good Customs. . . Custom is most perfect when it beginneth in young Years; This we call Education, which is, in Effect, but an

¹⁹ Lizanne Henderson, “Charmers Spells and Holy Wells: The Repackaging of Belief”, *Review of Scottish Culture* (April 2007) 10-26.

²⁰ John Aubrey, ‘Remains’, in *Three Prose Works*, (Fontwell, 1972) 132, qtd. in Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, (New York: Harper, 1978) 283.

²¹ Edward J. Cowan, “The Discovery of the Gàidhealtachd in Sixteenth Century Scotland”, *TGSI* lx, 1997-8 (2000): 259-84.

early Custom”.²²

The folklorist G. L. Gomme, described folklore as customs, rites and beliefs belonging to the people:

And oftentimes in definite antagonism to the accepted customs, rites and beliefs of the State or the nation to which the people and the groups of people belong. These customs, rites and beliefs are mostly kept alive by tradition . . . They owe their preservation partly to the fact that great masses of people do not belong to the civilisation which towers over them and which is never of their own creation.²³

It could thus be said that custom, from the eighteenth century onwards, was the rhetoric of legitimization for almost any usage, practice, or demanded right and, hence, was continually subject to change. By the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the understanding of custom began to fall under the sway of anthropological and sociological influences. Custom is used to apply to the “totality of behaviour patterns which are carried by tradition and lodged in the group, as contrasted with the more random personal activities of the individual”. Anthropological definitions state that custom is “a habit which is socially learned, socially performed, and socially transmitted”. Sociology also adopted the term as meaning, “social practice or usage that is shared in the group as tradition and learned by the individual as habit. The group within which it is shared may be a society or a sub-group of society”.²⁴

Jan Harold Brunvand claims to integrate a variety of terms, concepts, and points of view in his pursuit of a suitable definition of custom. Unfortunately, he falls

²² Francis Bacon, qtd. in E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, (London: Merlin, 1991) 2.

²³ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 6.

²⁴ E. Sapir, “Custom” *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. E. R. A. Seligman (New York: MacMillan, 1930) *loc. cit.*; J. Gillin, *The Ways of Men*, (New York: Appleton-Century, 1948); “Custom”, *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, eds. J. Gould and W. L. Kolb, (New York: Free Press, 1964) *loc. cit.*

back on the safety net of ‘tradition’ to explicate the complexity of folk custom: “a custom is a traditional *practice* — a mode of individual behaviour or a habit of social life — that is transmitted by word of mouth or imitation, then ingrained by social pressure, common usage, and parental or other authority”.²⁵ Perhaps a more stable, descriptive encapsulation of folk custom occurs in the following:

Customs do things — they are not abstract formulations of, or searches for, meanings, although they may convey meaning. Customs are clearly connected to, and rooted in, the material and social realities of life and work, although they are not simply derivative from, or re-expressions of these realities. Customs may provide a context in which people may do things it would be more difficult to do directly . . . they may keep the need for collective action, collective adjustment of interests, and collective expression of feelings and emotions within the terrain and domain of the coparticipants in a custom, serving as a boundary to exclude outsiders.²⁶

The central purpose of folk customs is hard to pinpoint, though it would seem that they reinforce and promote social cohesion within a group or society. While there are no hard and fast definitions for folk custom, it is, for the most part, based on tradition and repetition — and is temporally or spatially located. It must be borne in mind, however, that custom is not a static repetition of tradition.

It has been noted that human beings have consistently organized their lives around many “fields of symbolic action”. What differentiates present day behaviour from that of our predecessors is not so much that our way of thinking “is grounded on science and theirs on symbolism”, for “our behaviour also carries symbolic meaning”. Rather,

the real difference is that we do not bring forward from one context to the next the same set of ever more

²⁵ Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, (New York: Norton, 1986) 328.

²⁶ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 13.

powerful symbols: our experience is fragmented. Our rituals create a lot of little sub-worlds, unrelated. Their rituals create one single, symbolically consistent universe.²⁷

With hindsight, it can be seen that Scottish people from around 1740 were no longer operating within a “symbolically consistent universe” but were in the process of creating several different galaxies, each competing and jostling for position with the next. The belief, or unbelief, in supernatural phenomena such as second sight, fairies, witches, witchcraft and charming, was just one of many realms of Scottish intellectual, social and political life to experience the full brunt of a meteor shower. The various contributors to this book explore aspects of folk belief and folk culture both before and after the fallout. Chapters in this book which deal with either the earlier period or the lengthy era of transition are Ted Cowan’s erudite discussion of prophecy and second sight, Louise Yeoman’s insightful investigation of prophetesses during the time of the Covenanters, George Brunsden’s fascinating essay on astrology and almanacs, Hugh Cheape’s important contribution on the topic of charms and amulets, and Lizanne Henderson’s exploration of witch narratives and folktale.

Historians have generally viewed the eighteenth century as a period when customary practices were in decline, a phenomenon illuminated by Colin Kidd in his essay, in this collection, on the Scottish Enlightenment and the supernatural. Pressures to ‘reform’ popular culture were coming from above; oral tradition was being displaced by literacy; enlightenment (it is supposed) was filtering down from the elite to the common folk. However, the historian E. P. Thompson has argued that customary consciousness and customary usages were especially robust in the

²⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (1966; London: Ark Paperbacks, 1984) 69.

eighteenth century and attempts to “reform” customs were stubbornly resisted.²⁸

What is certain is that the century witnessed a profound alienation between the culture of the aristocracy and the common folk. The social historian Peter Burke suggested this emergent gulf was a European phenomenon, and that one consequence was the birth of folklore. Early folklorists, holding much the same view as that expressed by John Aubrey, went in search of the “Little Tradition” of the plebeians, to record their strange customs and rituals. Aside from the patronizing tone, what is significant here is the notion of customs as ‘survivals’ from a bygone era, in desperate peril of vanishing into the mists of time, if left unrecorded.²⁹

The widespread view that early modern Scotland was culturally divided into two main competing aggregations of belief may well be convenient for the sake of clarity but is, to say the least, problematic. In one we find the literati, the men of learning, of superior education and high culture, members of a circle which revolved around universities, literary and scientific societies, political, legal and medical institutions, and the church. It was, in proportion to the population, a small, but nonetheless, powerful group. The other party, or commonalty, to which the vast majority of the people belonged, comprised ‘the folk’, the unlettered, those of inferior, or at least of limited, education. Family life, occupation, the church, and possibly the parish school, were the fundamental institutions in their lives. This group largely depended on an oral culture and while its numbers were greater, it was increasingly subordinated by the purveyors of the written word. This recognizable division between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture is cognizant of only the extreme differences

²⁸ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 1.

²⁹ Barbara Myerhoff, “Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox”, *Celebration*, ed. V. Turner, (Washington D. C.: Smithsonian, 1982) 116. Victorian anthropology had an ethnocentric bent, valued its own usages as the measure of all things, and sought for the origins of customs with a vested interest in establishing the phases of human evolution.

presented by the two cultures and pays little attention to the many instances and occasions of overlap and integration, when two worlds or mentalities collide and form a sort of ‘middle’ culture, for lack of a better word. The problem for the historian or the folklorist is that people’s thoughts, attitudes and aspirations cannot easily be pigeon-holed, categorized or labeled. It is, after all, human individuality that makes us interesting, if not a little challenging.

It was said of Britain in general that “in the tranquil mood of the nineteenth century, the wars of church and state safely behind, and the battle of reason over superstition clearly won, Victorian gentry could smile at vulgar antiquities as the heritage of the unlettered and the unknowing”.³⁰ The veracity of this statement is questionable, though it does, perhaps, capture the mood of the times it describes, to some extent. The average household of an early nineteenth century gentleperson would almost certainly have contained a copy of John Brand’s *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777; revised 1813), which was a truly monumental achievement and has been described as having “laid the foundations for the science of folklore”.³¹

The fascination with ‘things that go bump in the night’ was far from cleansed from the supposedly ‘enlightened’ minds of a new generation of commentators and increasingly avid readers. One of the most well-read and influential of these figures was Sir Walter Scott. His Waverley novels are lavishly embellished with supernatural elements.³² He also printed a large number of ballads in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders* (1802)³³ and authored *Letters on Demonologie and Witchcraft*

³⁰ Richard Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) 19.

³¹ John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquaries: chiefly illustrating the origin of our Vulgar Customs, Ceremonies and Superstitions*, 2 vols., revised with additions by Henry Ellis (Newcastle on Tyne, 1777; London, 1813); Dorson, *British Folklorists*, 17.

³² See Coleman O. Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott’s Fiction, with chapters on the Supernatural in Scottish Literature*, (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), and chapter 6 below.

³³ Sir Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border: Consisting of Historical and Romantic Ballads*,

(1830). Like many writers before him, Scott distanced himself from his material by placing it within the eighteenth century framework of such perceived opposites as credulity/incredulity, belief/unbelief, savage/civilized, ignorance/enlightenment, black/white, and all leavened with a heavy dose of sympathetic criticism. And yet, for all his seeming efforts, his deep fascination and intrigue with the occult and invisible worlds shines brightly from each page. Scott died in 1832 but his fame and popularity continued to live on; he was just as likely to be consulted as Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, on questions relating to folklore and the supernatural. Douglas Gifford shows the perennial appeal of the supernatural and the occult in Scottish literature in his discussion of "Nathaniel Gow's Toddy".

A good friend of Scott's was Robert Chambers, born in Peebles but who moved to Edinburgh as a young lad of eleven years. Aged only twenty-two, Chambers produced the first study of urban folklore, *Traditions of Edinburgh* (1824) which reveled in such tales as those surrounding the infamous Major Weir and his less famous, but nevertheless sinister, younger sister Jean. The second volume he respectfully dedicated to Scott who had supplied him with some of his material. Scott was also a helpful contributor to Chamber's second enterprise, *The Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (1826; 1841), and a third publication, *Scottish Jests and Anecdotes* (1832) included many stories from one of Scott's chief informants, Mrs. Keith. Chamber's *pièce de resistance* was *The Book of Days* (1862-4) which based its framework not only on that established by other prolific antiquarians such as John Brand, John Aubrey and William Hone, but also on the groundbreaking work of men such as the Gaelic collector, John Francis Campbell of Islay, who produced his four

volume *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860-2).³⁴

William Grant Stewart introduced a fresh approach by classifying supernatural phenomena into distinct categories in *The Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements of the Highlanders of Scotland* (1823), a format still in vogue today. Stewart worked hard to delineate the differences between the ghost from the fairy, the fairy from the witch, while other writers, such as Scott's *Letters* (which came out seven years later) tended to stress the overlap between these traditions. Stewart claims to have collected many of his tales and anecdotes from oral tradition though he confesses to having edited them down for ease of publication;

the length of those primitive relations is necessarily much abridged, but a strict regard has been had to their original style and phraseology. The language is almost entirely borrowed from the mouth of the Highland narrator, and translated, it is hoped, in a manner so simple and unvarnished, as to be perfectly intelligible to the capacity of the peasant, for whose fireside entertainment this little volume may, perhaps, be peculiarly adapted.³⁵

In another part of the country, Hugh Miller, the famed geologist and all-round polymath, was amassing the first ever collection of folkloric and oral narrative materials from Cromarty and the Black Isle. Miller's vast canon, and in particular *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland* (1835)³⁶ has received limited acknowledgement as an early, if not the first, contribution to the folklore of the area. An exception was Richard Dorson, who praised *Scenes and Legends*, as exceeding "all expectation for a pioneer collection of local narratives and merits a recognition it

³⁴ Robert Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1824), *The Popular Rhymes of Scotland*, (Edinburgh and London, 1826; Edinburgh, 1841), *Scottish Jests and Anecdotes*, (Edinburgh, 1832), and *The Book of Days*, 2 vols. (London and Edinburgh, 1862-4); J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, 2 vols. (1860-2; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994) and *More West Highland Tales*, 2 vols. (1940; 1960; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994).

³⁵ Stewart, *Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements*, xv-xvi.

³⁶ Hugh Miller, *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland or the Traditional History of Cromarty*, ed. J. Robertson (1835; Edinburgh: B and W, 1994).

has never received, as a superb record of folk traditions seen in their full context of village society and history”.³⁷ There must be many reasons why Miller decided upon a collection of local and personal tales and legends, but the most apparent was his obsession with the idea that such traditions were dying out and it was essential to record them before they were gone altogether.

The field methods employed by John Francis Campell of Islay, when he set out to collect the traditional stories of the *Gàidhealtachd*, were unique for the times. While other commentators had concentrated their efforts within the libraries and archives of Edinburgh, Campbell tried out something new and truly innovative; he employed and sent out a trained team of Gaelic speakers to interview informants over the entire Highland and Western Isles region. The sheer quantity of material amassed by Campbell and his team was so great that most of it still languishes in the National Library of Scotland, as yet unpublished. The stories that made it to publication in the *Popular Tales* represents a fraction of what was actually collected. A notable modern collector, John MacInnes, demonstrates in his contribution, the relationship between Gaelic folk tradition and the church.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the church-driven desire to expunge all remnants of ‘pagan’ or ‘popish’ relics began to recede from the texts to be replaced with an ethnographic, anthropological and historical approach to ‘survivalisms’. There were a few exceptions, such as James Napier’s already mentioned *Superstitious Beliefs in the West of Scotland* who defined superstition as “beliefs and

³⁷ Dorson, *British Folklorists*, 138, 140. On Hugh Miller as folklorist see Lizanne Henderson, “The Natural and Supernatural Worlds of Hugh Miller”, *Celebrating the Life and Times of Hugh Miller. Scotland in the Early 19th Century* Ed. L. Borley (Cromarty Arts Trust, 2003) 89-98. See also, David Alston, “The Fallen Meteor: Hugh Miller and Local Tradition”, *Hugh Miller and the Controversies of Victorian Science*, ed. M. Shortland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), James Robertson, “Scenes, Legends and Storytelling in the Making of Hugh Miller”, *Hugh Miller in Context*, ed. L. Borley (Cromarty Arts Trust, 2002).

practices founded upon erroneous ideas of God and nature”.³⁸ But, for most collectors, the main concern resided in the preservation of tradition from a position of academic interest. One such was Lewis Spence, whose under-rated achievement in the field of folk studies is assessed by Juliette Wood. The phenomenon of modern, supposed, folk revivals is considered in Valentina Bold’s exploration of the cult movie ‘The Wicker Man’.

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³⁸ Napier, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland*, 4.